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Ferenc Kósa (1937–2018)

In the Spring of 1967 a big, black Volga – the emblematic car used by socialist state officials at the time – stopped in front of the dormitory of the Academy of Film Art in Budapest. The officials came to accompany the young Ferenc Kósa to the headquarters of the state film committee. At the time Kósa's graduation feature film, *Ten Thousand Suns* had been finished and practically banned for 3 years, so he could not officially graduate. However, at the film committee a rather surprising news awaited him: it is time to get a tuxedo and depart for France since his film is to be premiered in competition at the Cannes Film Festival – and the banned debut feature of a film student won Hungary's first ever major jury prize at Cannes (for best director) in a year when the main prize went to Antonioni's *Blow-Up*.

Kósa was brought up and spent his youth in a rather poor region of eastern Hungary on his grandmother's humble farm. At the Academy of Film Art he soon made friends with older students such as István Gaál and Sándor Sára, together with whom they had created a distinct stylistic trend of Hungarian film during the 1960s. Many of his contemporaries were influenced by the directors and films of the French New Wave but, according to Kósa, for him Sergei Eisenstein was one of the most interesting filmmakers, an example to follow in relation to film form, political and historical commitment. His two other cultural idols were the genius of 20th century Hungarian poetry, Attila József, with his deep connection to the sentiments and experiences of common people; and composer Béla Bartók, whose artistic method, and its roots in the musical heritage of the Hungarians, also shaped Kósa's concept of artistic creation.

During the production of *Ten Thousand Suns*, Kósa's idea was to follow the method of Béla Bartók – just like the composer, he was planning to collect authentic source material from common people living in the countryside and build his artistic composition around the collected material. In order to achieve his plan, together with his co-creator friends, Kósa was travelling around the country for one and a half years, interviewing people about their experiences of the last three decades of Hungarian history. In the end, the film was full of problematic topics, such as communist labour camps and the 1956 Revolution that would make the censorship board nervous. According to Kósa, it was the eleventh version of the screenplay that finally got the green light. Against all odds a unique and very mature piece had been created by a group of young filmmakers that even contained a line in the dialogue that referred to the events of 1956 as 'revolution' while the designated official term to be used was 'counter-revolution'. However, after the film had been completed, the censors decided to keep it away from cinemas. Before the ban, Kósa managed to organize a screening for a several dozens of influential Hungarian intellectuals. Most probably, thanks to someone who was present at this screening, the organizers of the Cannes Film Festival learned about the existence of the film, and in the Spring of 1967 they sent a message to the Hungarian cultural authorities that *Ten Thousand Suns* must be sent to Cannes, otherwise no Hungarian film will be selected for competition.

This first film contained all the major motifs and themes that would be present throughout Kósa's entire career: the deep interest in history and the experience of common people during turbulent times, affinity for characters who have a mission and stick to their moral standards under any circumstances. The style and visual language of the film follows a tradition founded and made internationally recognizable by István Szőts and his film *Men on the Mountain* (1942). Szőts combined the down to earth realism of on location shooting with characteristically formalist visuals and abstract, lyrical story telling. Kósa and several of his contemporaries (especially István Gaál and Sándor Sára) were following the path set by Szőts in the 1940s, telling stories of common countrymen by using a highly poetic visual form.

The leading common motif of Kósa's films is the interest in history. Many of these films through historical themes were actually speaking about the time of their making – symbolic speech was the native language of Hungarian films of the era. However, in the case of Kósa, symbolic speech often had very real consequences and stirred waves outside the screening room – his second film is a good example.

Judgement (1970) was a story about the leader of the 1514 peasant uprising, György Dózsa. Kósa considered Dózsa as the Hungarian equivalent of Spartacus, Jean D'Arc, Galilei or Gandhi – the quintessential figure of human perseverance, the ultimate revolutionary. The film's short story invoked a passionate debate about the planned feature, and about the question and interpretation of revolution.

Kósa's interest in the anatomy of revolution is also clear in his third film, *Beyond Time*, (1973). The story takes place in the 1920s but easily can be read as the description of the mental state of Hungarian society at the beginning of the 1970s, after 'friendly' socialist countries invaded Czechoslovakia and the economic reforms initiated in Hungary in 1968 were also halted. At a time when the possibility of any kind of progression seemed slim, Kósa placed his story in a reform prison of the 1920s and asked the question how a (communist) revolutionary can keep its spirit when stripped of all power and opportunity. After some struggle the film could be premiered in Hungary, but was not let out of the country to compete at international festivals.

Second World War and the struggle of the generation of the fathers is another important theme in the oeuvre. It plays a central role in *Snowfall* (1974) and also in Kósa's last feature film *The Other Person* (1987). *Snowfall* takes place in 1944 and tells the story of a young man gaining self-awareness amongst the inhumane conditions of war. In this film Kósa returns to the style of István Szőts, uses poetic realism in order to stress the connection between men and nature. The highly stylized storytelling connects humanistic values to nature and idealizes people who were able to maintain their organic relation with nature during the time of cruelty. *The Other Person* depicts two generations' struggle in the face of history. In the first part of the film the generation of fathers has to prove their humanity during the time of the Hungarian fascist regime in 1944, while in the second part the generation of the sons face the events of 1956. The central question is whether total and conscious resistance to violence is possible during the time of armed struggle. The legacy of the father that is developed into an ethical imperative by the son is that the other person is also us, by hurting others we are being hurt as well. When ultimately the young hero of the second part ends up in an unmarked grave, the rationale of non-violent resistance is placed in brackets.

Kósa has also made two documentary films about exemplary heroes. The first one, *Mission* (1976) was about the most successful pentathlonist ever, András Balczó. The hero, who is a man with a mission, is a direct continuation of the characters in Kósa's fiction films. The documentary asks: how can a person with extremely strong sense of justice and unbendable ethical principles manage in the word of lies and false achievements. The story struck a nerve in Hungarian society – audiences were loudly applauding during screenings, and more than 400 Q&As with the film makers were organized around the country. The screening of the film stirred waves even in Poland, where Kieslowski, Zanussi and Wajda were praising it for diagnosing the agony of the socialist system. In 1976 Kósa also started to shoot his second documentary, *By Right of the Final Word* (1976–1987) about a biologist, inventor József Béres. The hero was again a 'difficult' man, a man with a mission who fights for his right, and stubbornly follows his convictions. The story of Béres proved to be too controversial, and authorities halted the film that could be finished only during the political thaw of the late 1980s to become a hit and focus of public attention.

The fall of communism in 1989 led Kósa towards direct political engagement, and it seemed an organic continuation of his activities as an artist. During the first free parliamentary election in 1990, he became member of parliament and played an important role in formulating the Hungarian law on mass media and later the film industry. In an interview in 1994 he said:

I decided to stop making films, and try to find the path for direct action, and to provide real assistance. Not because I wanted to become a politician from an intellectual, but because it had dawned on me that we were born not to be an artist or a politician, but to be a human.

Retiring from public office, his interest turned more and more towards photography. After the 2015 retrospective exhibition covering his full photographic oeuvre he wrote: *'I have been searching for moments when the man of limited life span meets the endless Universe. (...) the moments when we experience of being part of nature.'* These motifs of the tiny individual against the endless force of history, and the humanistic values those are best captured in relation to nature were the strong foundation that Kósa's timeless oeuvre was built upon.

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